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Reviewed by Ralph C. Hancock

Both these books challenge the Latter-day Saint reader to consider the political implications of religious beliefs, thus contesting the common and perhaps too comfortable assumptions that religion and politics can be kept neatly separate, and that all political views—or at least all mainstream or conventional political views—are equally compatible with allegiance to the restored gospel. This is a worthy challenge; we ought to ask ourselves what guidance we as citizens can receive from the gospel in general and from the Book of Mormon in particular. However, these authors’ specific responses to this question involve a number of assumptions that require closer scrutiny.

The author of *The Book of Mormon and the Constitution* is listed as H. Verlan Andersen, late member of the Quorum of the Seventy (released 1991, d. 1992), but the book is “compiled and presented by Hans V. Andersen, Jr.” The question of authorship is further complicated by the presenter’s determination to associate the views of the book with the late President Ezra Taft Benson; the introduction is full of references to affinities between “Daddy” and “President Benson,” and President Benson is much quoted. The compiler indeed goes so far in his introduction as to quote a reference by an anonymous church employee to the book “your dad and the prophet were working on” (pp. vii–viii). More perplexing is the unexplained inclusion after the introduction of a copy of a 1976 letter from Elder Benson to H. Verlan Andersen in which Elder Benson reports that he is “very pleased to note that
you feel that [the two pieces of legislation] you are proposing [are] supported strongly by the Book of Mormon," and goes on to recommend "two tapes of the Alan Stang Report . . . a new service of the JBS" (p. x, emphasis added; another letter is printed on p. 230). The presenter (Andersen Jr.) does mention that "this book was never in its final form" (p. viii), but provides no assistance to the reader in considering why Elder Andersen (not to mention President Benson) never chose to publish the book in his own name during his lifetime.

Andersen argues that our religion not only provides guidance in the political realm, but in fact also offers "the proper solution to the problem of government . . . the knowledge necessary to solve every problem" (p. xii). This solution is identified at once with the teaching of the Book of Mormon and with the "only . . . government and . . . set of laws which were divinely established," that is, the Constitution of the United States of America (p. xix). Both of these, moreover, are held to be reducible to "the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule" (p. 3).

The Nephites under the reign of judges and the Gentiles under the U.S. Constitution are presented as the only nations to possess simultaneously the gospel, the power of self-rule, and a separation between church and state (p. 10). The Nephites' succumbing to secret combinations is thus taken to be quite an exact parallel to our present vulnerability to "communism," construed very broadly as any exercise of government power beyond the implementation of the Golden Rule, which the author interprets as mandating the protection of each individual's life, liberty, and property.

All governments which "refuse to carry out the death penalty for murder as the Lord has commanded" or which "teach their people to steal" (p. 87) by exercising powers beyond the minimal protections of individual rights are thus condemned. From this standpoint, contemporary Americans—in particular Latter-day Saints—are held to be already in the thrall of communism, or secret combinations, or the great and abominable church of the devil. "During the last sixty or seventy years, we also have come down to believe in their works and partake of their spoils and join with them in their evil combinations" (p. 29). Later chapters consider distinct policy areas in contemporary government as exam-
piess of secret combinations; these include licensing laws (ch. 21),
regulatory laws (ch. 22), the welfare state (ch. 23), and paper
money (ch. 24). But Andersen’s sternest warnings are reserved for
the practice of priestcraft. “Every government supported educa-
tional system,” Andersen argues, “… falls under the Book of
Mormon definition of enforced priestcraft” (p. 68). He draws his
definition from 2 Nephi 26:29–30 and Alma 1:3. Even unen-
forced priestcraft, or any paid teaching, is held to expose its prac-
titioners to the insidious temptation of pride, “the great curse of
the teaching profession” (p. 209).

Such conclusions will undoubtedly strike most readers as ex-
treme, even offensive. And yet I believe it would be a mistake
simply to dismiss Andersen’s challenge without seriously and
prayerfully examining the prophetic statements, both ancient and
modern, marshaled by the author. What, after all, is the relevance
to us of the Book of Mormon’s warnings against priestcraft and
secret combinations? What is the significance of the U.S. Constitu-
tion in relation to prophecy? And how healthy is the constitu-
tional order today? Andersen’s ample quotations from inspired
sources ought to spur us to consider such questions earnestly, even
urgently.

Still, it seems to me that a number of very weak links stretch
Andersen’s chain of argumentation. At the core of this argumen-
tation lies the identification of the Gadiantons’ secret combina-
tions with “communism”—defined as any departure from the
most minimal understanding of the legitimate scope of govern-
ment (the protection of individual rights to life, liberty, and prop-
erty)—and a corresponding identification of free agency with the
U.S. Constitution, defined as being based upon such a minimalist
understanding. Both of these unqualified identifications merit
scrutiny.

The identification between secret combinations and commu-
nism springs from an epiphany reported in the compiler’s intro-
duction, thanks to which the senior Andersen discovered a con-
nection he had missed in “a thousand” earlier readings: 3 Nephi
3:7–10 “was the clearest proof the Gadianton robbers were com-
munists and Satan’s sales pitch hadn’t changed over centuries”
(p. vii). The key passage is Giddianhi’s invitation to the Nephites
to become “partners of all our substance” (p. 7). While I agree
that it is worth considering similarities between Giddianhi's appeal and various well-organized temptations facing contemporary saints, I am not convinced that the simple and immediate identification with "communism" is sufficient to conclude all reflection on such similarities.

This difficulty cannot be addressed, in any case, in abstraction from the deeper conceptual problem surrounding the definition of "communism" as any extension of the scope of government beyond a very minimalist or libertarian understanding of the protection of life, liberty, and property. I do not believe Andersen succeeds in demonstrating that the righteous Nephites shared precisely this minimalist view. Indeed, the author quotes a substantial piece of evidence to the contrary (Mosiah 21:17), where Limhi commands "that every man should impart to the support of the widows and their children," only to attempt rather weakly to dismiss the significance of this passage in understanding the proper scope of government by noting that Limhi's purpose was not self-enrichment but "more equitably apportioning the cost of war" (p. 57). The contemporary application of such reasoning would yield no straightforward and unambiguous "solution" to the problem of the scope of government, but only open debates as to (for example) the meaning of equity and the motives of legislators.

Still less does the author succeed in demonstrating that the U.S. Constitution embodies his radically minimalist theory of government. In fact this identification is more assumed than argued; there is very little here in the way of sustained exposition of the text of the Constitution, not to mention its historical and intellectual context. To be sure, particular constitutional clauses are occasionally mentioned, such as the Fifth Amendment (p. 137), or the provisions concerning monetary powers in article I, sections 8 and 10 (p. 174). But in a tiny section ostensibly devoted to "The Purposes of the Founding Fathers" (p. 116), Andersen assumes the simple identification of God's purposes as he construes them with the political aims of the founders, and then quotes the preamble, with its announcement of aims including not only liberty, but also, notably, a more perfect union, justice, and the promotion of the general welfare, only to dismiss this rich evocation with the
promise to show that in fact individual freedom is "not only the first, but the exclusive purpose of government" (p. 116).

One does not have to be a friend of those contemporary readings of the Constitution that grant nearly unlimited scope to the national government to find Andersen's gloss less than compelling. In any case, his most fundamental justification of this reading relies mainly neither on scripture nor on constitutional research but on an extremely simplified version of the classical liberal argument: whatever else we desire, we desire freedom, and this desire "takes precedence over every other consideration" (p. 117). To embed this premise in the gospel is only possible on the basis of an undefended identification of moral agency with the abstract, morally neutral, and at least potentially reductionist freedom of Enlightenment rationalism. Even if this identification is granted, Andersen would still have to explain why classical liberal thinkers from John Locke to Adam Smith (not to mention the American framers) who shared this individualist premise failed to arrive at the same extremely parsimonious view of the legitimate scope of government.

Moreover, assuming he succeeded in providing such an explanation, the author would still have to defend his identification of minimalist government with the Ten Commandments. For it is not obvious how, on the basis of Andersen's libertarian premise—ostensibly neutral with respect to conceptions of the good life—one arrives at or even reconciles the conclusion that government should, say, enforce Sabbath observance, or punish the sin of adultery. I sympathize with his argument to the effect that "the home is the fundamental unit of society" (p. 144) and that sexual sin has wide social costs which society has a legitimate interest in minimizing, but I do not see how such a justification for widening the scope of government can be limited to areas approved by the author or reconciled with his stringent individualist minimalism.

Latter-day Saints can fully embrace the scriptural teaching according to which the Constitution was produced by wise men raised up by the Lord (see D&C 101:80) without concluding that the Constitution is simply identical with or deductible from some plain and permanent set of political theorems derived somehow at once from a radically individualist philosophy and from the Golden Rule and the Ten Commandments. Thus, however much
one sympathizes with the author’s effort to understand and defend the Constitution from a Latter-day Saint standpoint, *The Book of Mormon and the Constitution* finally reminds us, despite itself, of the moral and intellectual necessity of making careful distinctions before cementing alliances.

*If Men Were Angels* also strives to alert Latter-day Saints to the political implications of their faith. It is, in a sense, more intellectually ambitious than the work reviewed above, attempting to support a political reading of the Book of Mormon with references to the work of various conservative intellectuals such as Russell Kirk and Paul Johnson. But it is also less clear and cohesive in its argumentation, haphazardly mixing rather ill-digested borrowings from a venerable conservative intellectual tradition with appeals to scripture on the one hand and with halting attempts at original political theorizing on the other.

In contrast to Andersen, Hainsworth follows Russell Kirk, a leading conservative literary figure, recently deceased, in positing the priority of order to freedom, and in attributing this view to the American founders. This view, which casts the events surrounding 1776 as the American “Preservation” rather than Revolution, has much to recommend it, especially as a response to efforts by contemporary activists to enlist the early patriots as forerunners of radically egalitarian or liberationist projects. It does, of course, leave us with the question of why those patriots called themselves and their aims revolutionary. In any case, the present author does little to recommend a Kirkean argument when he leaps abruptly, without so much as opening a new paragraph, from the “Hebraic” covenant represented in the Mayflower Compact to those “two pieces of our sacred scripture (The Constitution and *The Federalist*)” (p. 28).¹ When the question of the intellectual framework of the Constitution is discussed, or at least broached, the author betrays no awareness of the tension between an appeal to a continuous tradition or to “English principles” (p. 29) and an argument from “popular sovereignty” or “the natural rights of the people” (pp. 31, 32). It is impossible, moreover, to trace a consistent line of reasoning in subsequent faltering presentations.

¹ Quoted from Willmore Kendall and George W. Carry, *the Basic Symbols of the American Political Tradition* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), 152.
of constitutional themes, as in a section devoted to the separation of powers (pp. 35–6). And in an undeveloped point that is as surprising from the standpoint of contemporary conservatism as from that of the founders’ understanding of constitutionalism, Hainsworth elevates the Supreme Court to the status of supreme guardian of “the entire arrangement,” exercising the “sovereign prerogative... of determining the meaning of the Constitution” (p. 32).

Hainsworth’s attempt at a theory of government in chapter 3 never really recovers from introductory remarks such as this: “Government. There is, perhaps, no more used (and abused) word in the English language” (p. 43). Or consider: “The point being, government is everywhere in our lives. It is regnant, it is flatulent, and its influence expands daily with increasing speed, intruding more and more” (p. 44, emphasis in original). Regnant and intrusive flatulence is, presumably, a very bad condition indeed; but beyond this it is not clear what the author is trying to convey in introducing this chapter. When he turns next to a search for a definition of government, he surveys, without apparent benefit, a number of dictionary or textbook definitions, only to settle on this: “The key to realistically conceptualizing government is to understand that whatever else it is, government is people” (p. 47, emphasis in original).

The point seems to be that people can be expected to seek their own advantage, and so a section follows that emphasizes the role of self-interest and of special interest groups, likened to the Madisonian understanding of “faction.” Rather than regarding factional self-interest as inherent in popular government, however, the author proceeds in the next sections to bemoan our “lost virtue” (pp. 52–3) and our ignorance of Chesterton’s “democracy of the dead” (pp. 54–6). The connections between arguments, or rather opinions, expressed in these various sections are far from obvious.

It is in the fourth chapter, “Give Us a King,” that the actual text of the Book of Mormon figures most prominently. The author presents King Noah as an example of “the evil to which autocratic power can quickly descend” (p. 71), and he invites us to consider “the title ‘King’ as a metaphor for centralized government—autocratic governments of all kinds” (p. 73). At the
same time he interestingly compares combinations (which "may or may not be secret," p. 77) to Madisonian factions, though without quite explaining either what distinguishes disastrous factions from benign and inevitable interest groups or the connection between centralizing autocracy and the plurality of selfish combinations. He invites us to consider the contemporary relevance of "danger signals" gleaned from the Book of Mormon such as "the accumulation of wealth" and "the appearance of ambitious men" (p. 76). Finally, he explores, albeit too briefly and haphazardly, the contemporary significance of prophetic warnings that the Constitution would one day "hang by a thread" (pp. 78–82). If, as Hainsworth not implausibly asserts, there has been "a massive shift in political rights and obligations, a fundamental change in the pattern of political thought," then this transformation deserves a much more careful exposition than can be found in these pages.

Following a rather unfocused discussion in chapter 5 of issues surrounding constitutional amendments, in which appeals to popular sovereignty are intermixed blithely with praise of the original Constitution for constraining democracy, Hainsworth opens up a new line of argumentation. The last three chapters of the book attempt to situate the restoration within a broad theory of history. The first revelation to Joseph Smith in 1820 is said to open the modern age, in which the world would be "polarized by the same two irreconcilable ideologies" as characterized in the world of the Book of Mormon (p. 103). The restoration provoked a new emergence of "anti-Christ doctrines" (p. 105), represented especially by Darwin, Marx, and Freud (ch. 6); by a mood of relativism unintentionally promoted by Einstein's theory of relativity (ch. 7); and by more recent forms of decadence (including feminism, multiculturalism, deconstruction, and postmodernism) somehow associated with the "Information Age" (p. 144) famously evoked by Alvin Toffler (ch. 8). The following passages are characteristic of the author's attempt to establish historical connections between the restoration and these modern evils: "No sooner had the Gospel been restored to the earth and the Church established, than H.M.S. Beagle set sail" (p. 105). "Using Hegel’s dialectic, Marx had come to these conclusions as
early as the late 1840’s, shortly after the restoration of the Gospel” (p. 112).

Let me make it clear that I am ready to entertain arguments concerning evils foisted upon the world by Marx, Freud, and perhaps even Darwin. But Hainsworth contributes little to such arguments by insisting that the “process of secularization...began immediately after the introduction of the Restored Gospel” (p. 169). Even the most superficial familiarity with intellectual and social history should make it plain that this process has much deeper roots. In fact Hainsworth himself suggests in his epilogue that the “beginning of the decline” goes back to the nominalism of William of Occam in the fourteenth century (p. 172). An interesting hypothesis—but just how does it square with the much-rehearsed theory, or rather notion, of the sudden unleashing of the antichrist in...well, almost exactly 1820?

Finally, it is this reviewer’s unpleasant duty to note that this book is marred by very substantial defects in style, punctuation, and diction (thus “antidote” for “anecdote,” p. 154, and “ener-vated” for, I suppose, “energized,” p. 90). The author, moreover, is given to a rhetorically crippling or even self-parodying overstatement and defensiveness (see, for example, pp. 2, 168).

What is one to make of the assertion that “Latter-day Saints share a devotion to the traditions of Western civilization—from the revelations at Sinai to the atoning life of Jesus Christ, to a market-based economy, to freedom of expression, to eating with a fork” (p. 178)? Say what?

Like Verlan Andersen, Brad Hainsworth is prematurely confident that all views of which he approves must somehow fit together in a seamless whole: a traditionalist reverence for the “permanent things” (p. 179) of the Christian West, the political theory of individualism and the minimal state, the values of the nuclear family, and, of course, the teachings of the Book of Mormon and latter-day revelation. The challenge of contemporary relativism ought to incline all citizens of constitutional democracies as well as all Latter-day Saints to welcome any common ground that can be secured among these diverse sources of moral, religious, and political order. But nothing can be secured until we prove ourselves ready first to recognize distinctions, even tensions. In particular, we will not be ready as Latter-day Saints to contribute to
the defense, or, indeed, the restoration of authentic constitutionalism unless we first recognize the priority of Zion to even the most worthy political objectives.